

Pūjā - Devotional Attention

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 12:01

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa.*

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So the next word I wanted to tackle was *puja*. So it translates as honour, worship, but perhaps the nicest is devotional attention. Rather like that. Devotional attention. So it's an attention which is flavoured with devotion. Like *metta* is an attention flavoured with loving kindness or goodwill.

And really, the *puja* is the other side of the practice. You have the actual teachings themselves, and then we put that into this practice of *vipassanā*, which is an investigation. But without *metta*, without devotion, the practice can lack a bit of juice. It gets a bit dry. So this really is the language of the heart. It's the heart's involvement in the spiritual process.

And it's words such as wonder and awe, praise, worship, which is a little bit out of use these days, but it's a very strong praise, isn't it, and joy, the joy of receiving the Dharma, the joy, even the sympathetic joy in the Buddha himself having attained this enlightenment. So those are the sorts of devotional emotions you might say.

And you can see that this expresses itself through art, through buildings, temples, all spiritual art in that sense, and in pictures, sculptures, the great art of religious spiritual sculptures, and there's music, chanting. In our school, it would be this sort of chanting, which is not only memorizing the Buddha's words, it's about creating the peacefulness that goes with it.

And that's why, even if you listen to Gregorian chant, it's always on a level of peaceful. The emotions come, the joy and the awe and all that, but they're stabilized or rooted in this peace or equanimity. So if you listen to plain chant, just keep listening to it, it actually creates within you this very deep ongoing peace.

Then of course it got corrupted into polyphonic music and all that stuff. And the emotion started growing until you get to the romantics and it becomes silly. But if you stay with this original spiritual music, it's always this one line, you see. And if they are happy, it just rises gently above the medium of equanimity. That's my own take on music.

So all those things that we see are all part of the devotional aspect of our practice. So that when we come into a shrine room, you've got a statue. These statues have a *mudrā*, which means their particular attitude

in which the Buddha is in. So this one is the concentration mudrā, the *jhāna* mudrā, which is the mudrā really of enlightenment. You get others with the hand up, which is the mudrā of fearlessness. You get the *vārada*, the mudrā of offering, with the left hand offering things. You get the mudrā where he seems to be holding a lotus, which is the mudrā of teaching.

And perhaps the most famous one, or the most regular one, is where he's touching the earth, which is just before his enlightenment, when he, as it were, overcomes the attack of Māra, which was basically doubt. Like, who was he? And what was he playing at? Why don't you just enjoy life? Who are you to try and work out this great mystery? And he grounded himself, you see. Interestingly enough, it was the perfection of generosity which gave him the strength to carry on. When you give, you see, it's the renunciation. So, in a sense, he's reminding himself that he's not only doing it for himself. So, those are your mudrās.

And, you know, the candles. So, there's always candles. The light, you see. So, remember that the light of a candle is symbolic of the understanding, the path of wisdom. It's heat, the path of love. So, you start with love as your basis. And the action of the flame, good works. So that's in your eightfold path, right understanding, right attitude, that's the lover, right speech, right action, right livelihood. So the flame is really one of the better and the best symbols.

Incense usually refers to the perfume of good actions in your life. That's where it's symbolical. And the flowers always have an essence, impermanence. They rise and pass away.

When it comes to bowing, remember, that's a very strong body language for surrender. That's one thing, but I mean it can be done out of gratitude, you see, or out of praise. Depends on what you want to put into the action. Even if you find it difficult to do it physically, you can do it at least within yourself, the yielding.

And then you get the practice of walking around, circumambulation, you see, always keeping the object of veneration to your right. So even the Buddha said, before he died, is to create these *stupas* out of his ashes. And they were separated into eight, eight people wanted these ashes, eight different groups, and it was divided into these different groups. And what is a stupa? It's a burial mound. So if you think about when you visit the graves of your parents or your grandparents or whatever, that's what you're doing. You're just going there perhaps to remember your relationship with them, to thank them for it. So when you're walking around a stupa, that's basically a devotional exercise, you see, just to remember the memory of the Buddha in remembrance of me.

And they also did it with Bodhi trees. So remember, in the beginning, for about 500 years, there was no statue or picture of the Buddha. He was always represented either by a tree or a footprint or a seat, anything but the actual physical representations. This came about 500 years later with the Greeks. They started one line of sculpture, very beautiful Greek Adonises, and down in south of India the Mathura, which were begun then. And then since then, of course, there's always been statues about.

And so, finally, the expression of this puja, of this honour, devotion, etc., leads, you see, it's a response, it's the heart's response to the practice. So that when we have faith, it's not just an intellectual assent. I mean, that's how it's often described, especially through the Christian tradition, partly a sort of an intellectual acceptance. There has to be the heart with it. There has to be a certain feeling that this is where one wants to be, because that's where you're rooted within the heart base.

And so taking the refuges and precepts is a way of re-establishing your heart commitment to the practice you're doing. And what is it that you're actually doing when you take refuges and precepts? So the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. You're basically slowly making that the reference point of your life. That's what it is.

So it's like these merry-go-rounds with these horses going up and down. So most people are jumping on these horses, going round and round and round. And you find that, and even now you may find, that there are certain things that you're doing in your life which, as it were, are disconnected. A lot of people do all sorts of things, but they're all disconnected. They don't have a central reference point to which it all makes sense.

So by taking refuge in a particular spiritual path, what that becomes is your reference point. So now everything in your life has to make sense to this reference point. And that's how it becomes integral, interconnected. And from that you get your deeper meaning as to why the hell we're living here in the first place. And that's what taking refuge actually means. So it's not just an intellectual thing or even something that comes through vipassanā practice. Actually, something which moves at a deeper level within the heart.

And then, of course, one finds these practices, such as chanting and doing these circumambulations and all that. I mean, that's why we're having a stupa put in. You find them really uplifting. They're the juice of the practice, you might say.

But, of course, none of it actually, I mean, and this is the other thing, then, of course, if your practice just becomes that, just becomes puja, then really there's no hope, because that's when the spiritual life corrupts into schmaltz. So it's got to be this balance, and it's got to be seen that the puja is there to support the practice of insight, not the other way around.

I can only hope my few words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all your suffering sooner rather than later.

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